



# Military Culture, Subtitling, and Branches of Service in *Band of Brothers*

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**Abstract.** The present article investigates subtitling issues in Hungarian and Romanian connected to the highly popular TV mini-series *Band of Brothers*. The introductory part offers a brief presentation of the importance of audiovisual translation and the challenge of fansubs to the detriment of professional translators, but we also offer definitions of *military culture* before analysing terms describing the branches of service (mostly) in the US Army.

**Keywords:** US Army branches, military culture, subtitle, quality, units

## 1. Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century saw an unprecedented technical revolution, which led – among others – to *globalization*, having an enormous impact on translation as well. Today we can talk about a fully-fledged *translation industry*, becoming extremely diversified. Most notably, we can mention the growing popularity of the entertainment industry, reaching all walks of life.

The movie industry may be the most visible part of the entertainment industry combined with translation, having millions of viewers in many languages, giving birth to the financially most rewarding subpart of translation, the *audiovisual* or *multimedia translation* (AVT or MMT). The emerging importance of audiovisual translation was already mentioned in 2003 by Díaz Cintas: “... few can deny that one of the branches that has received the greatest impetus is audiovisual translation” (2003: 192), being convinced that “audiovisual translation is in vogue and, thanks to its inherent links with technology and the omnipresence of audiovisual products in our societies, it appears to have a promising future” (2003: 203). Another source refers to AVT as *screen translation*, concluding that it has an “increasingly important role in the dissemination of popular culture

through the audiovisual media” (Kuhiwczak–Littau 2007: 120). We tend to believe that their hopes and findings are more than justified today.

While translators involved in AVT produce the translation of scripts, which is later adapted to dubbing purposes, *subtitlers* typically focus on transcript translations in the form of captions displayed at the bottom of the screen (we primarily think of Europe and the Americas, and “standard” subtitles).

However, an important change is that the emergence of AVT resulted in a rather blurred line between professional and amateur subtitlers as the relatively cheap and easily available hardware and software requirements to produce a subtitle drastically raised the number of subtitlers. Further facts to consider are listed below:

- we witness a real “boom” of TV series that (only) professional subtitlers cannot handle;
- amateurs fanatically wait for the possibility to download (without discussing the legal background) any TV series, and within 24 hours they upload their subtitles; hence we have loads of *fansubs*, for which viewers hardly ever complain as they are happy to watch their favourite series instantly (quantity over quality);
- viewers can rate the subtitles (usually on a 1–5 scale, where 5 is the best), and they can opt for the highest rated subtitle available for download;
- the ethical background of fansubs is of little importance due to various reasons: viewers take subtitles “as is” because they obtain it for free, the subtitlers are mostly “invisible” (cf. Venuti 2004), but the most important factor is that the legal status of translators and subtitlers is rather debatable, knowing that no certification is really needed in order to profess, or “virtually anyone can start certifying translators” (Pym, Grin, Sfreddo–Chan 2012: 4).

Although we have mentioned many setbacks that hinder quality subtitles, reality proves that there is a “natural selection” favouring those subtitles that are of better quality (cf. the rating possibility of fansubs).

In the following, we are investigating the Hungarian and Romanian subtitles of the highly successful TV series *Band of Brothers*.

## 1.1. Band of Brothers

The TV mini-series is highly successful, being among the top three (together with *Planet Earth* and *Planet Earth II*) on the Internet Movie Database rating list (as of 2018),<sup>1</sup> even surpassing the rating of *Game of Thrones*. This compels us to have high expectations regarding the translation or subtitle of the original English transcript. We watched the movie in English with English subtitle, and then we compared it with the Hungarian and Romanian subtitles, creating an

1 [https://www.imdb.com/chart/toptv?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/chart/toptv?ref_=tt_awd). Accessed on: 9 September 2018.

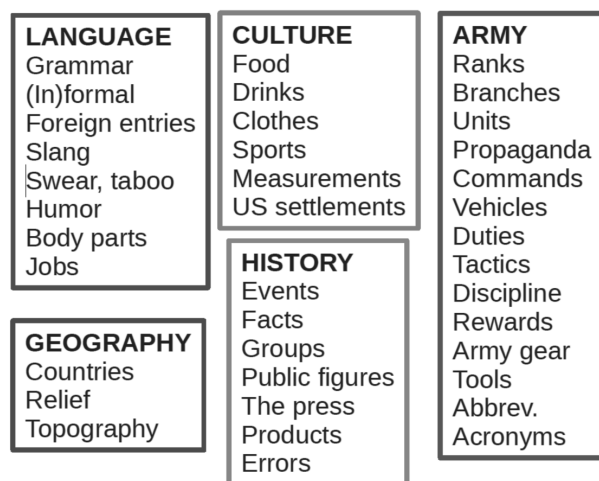
Excel database of almost 1,000 entries, which was later divided into categories, which are to be explained in the following.

An evergreen issue of translation studies is the debate over “untranslatable” terms, which are culture-specific words or expressions difficult to render in another language. One of the most comprehensible tables to include two major approaches belongs to Mujzer-Varga (2007: 64), who mention that authors looking for possible translations refer to them as *cultural words* (Newmark 1988) or *culture-bound terms/lexes* (Chesterman 1997, Katan 1999), while those who support the “untranslatable” aspect refer to them as *culturally untranslatable items* (Catford 1965: 99), *lexical/conceptual gap* (Katan 1999), *lacuna* (Vinay–Darbelnet 1995), *realia* (Klaudy 2003), or *non-equivalence at word level* (Baker 1992).

Without delving into the debate, we would like to mention a most comprehensive categorization of these cultural words created by Vlahov–Florin (1980) and available in English in Klaudy’s book (Klaudy 2003: 205–208), where there is a separate entry for *military realia*, including *military units, arms, uniforms, ranks, and assignments*. We tend to believe that active subtitlers should be acquainted with the specific terminology in the area they work, wherefore Vlahov and Florin’s categorization could be a possible starting point for those who consider themselves prepared for subtitling. More than that, certain bilingual dictionaries are needed – in our case, an English–Hungarian (*Angol–magyar katonai szótár* 1985) and an English–Romanian (Cojocaru 1976) dictionary seem to be relevant – to be completed with all sorts of reliable online sources (glossaries, databases, reference books, and the help of experts in particular areas) as well as a keen interest in the field.

We mentioned that Vlahov and Florin’s system is a good starting point and not a final list as it has certain drawbacks: it can never be full (new terms belonging to unmapped categories may constantly appear), certain categories are already missing (e.g. *history* or *IT*), and there are inevitable overlaps among existing categories. Last but not least, we can rearrange and further detail the categories. In fact, this is what we did during the collection of entries, creating the following preliminary categories as a possible mind map (*Figure 1*).

However, when focusing on any of the categories (Language, Culture, Army, Geography, History), we found out that they must be further detailed – to be discussed in the next section.



**Figure 1.** *Band of Brothers – preliminary mind map*

## 2. Military culture

Although it is hardly possible to offer a conclusive definition of *culture*, we believe that two definitions may help:

- “The distinctive customs, achievements, products, outlook, etc. of a society or group; the way of life of a society or group” (Trumble–Stevenson 2002: 575);
- “attitudes and behaviour characteristic of a particular social group”.<sup>2</sup>

Both definitions highlight the fact that culture is specific to a certain group; thus, it is worth approaching the army as a special social group, creating a particular *military culture*. Naturally, there are many definitions regarding military culture as well, and three of them are presented below:

- “Military culture represents the ethos and professional attributes, both in terms of experience and intellectual study, that contribute to a common core understanding of the nature of war within military organizations.” (Murray 1999: 27);
- “In the military we have our own language that isn’t understood by most civilians. Terminology, acronyms, processes for waging war...these all seem to be alien if not translated into civilian English.”<sup>3</sup>
- “BROTHERHOOD. That is what military culture means to me. It’s the deep feeling of brotherhood that is forged in the heat of battle”<sup>4</sup> (SGT Ben Keen).

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/culture>. Accessed on: 6 June 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The definition belongs to a Master Sergeant, a non-commissioned officer in the US Army. At: <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/what-is-military-culture>. Accessed on: 9 September 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The explanation is available at: <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/what-is-military-culture>. Accessed on: 9 September 2018.

While the first definition is a rather objective one, the last one is the closest to the atmosphere *Band of Brothers* was created in. Actually, one of the executive producers, Tom Hanks, stated that: “We’ve made history fit onto our screens. We had to condense down a vast number of characters, fold other people’s experiences into 10 or 15 people, ... I still think it is three or four times more accurate than most films like this” (Riding 2001).

At this stage, we presume that translators or subtitlers of wartime movies are familiar with this military culture and the specific terminology, which mostly has proper renderings in the target language, but it may happen that only pure borrowing is possible (cf. “untranslatable” or typically not translated item). As for the *Band of Brothers*, the subtitlers should know that the TV mini-series is based on Stephen Ambrose’s book (1992), which has been translated into many languages, which might help in the case of subtitles as well.

The book was translated into Hungarian by György Molnár in 2001 (Ambrose 2001) and the subtitle for the series by Miklós Vincze (SDI Media Hungary) in the same year, the year of the release of the series; so, they must have worked simultaneously but individually on their projects.<sup>5</sup>

The Romanian subtitle was carried out by Alexandru Gheorghia (SDI Media Group), probably in 2001, while – interestingly – the book was translated only in 2009 by Nicolae-Dan Cetină and published the following year (Ambrose 2010); so, the subtitler could not get any support from the book.

In the following, we will check the quality of the Hungarian and Romanian subtitles in various categories.

### 3. Categorizing terms in *Band of Brothers*

The collected military culture and specific terminology is connected to the struggles of the US Army to land in Europe and defeat the German Army. As the army is a special group of people with specific military culture, they are functionally organized and make use of a specific communication among them.

*Functionally*, we can distinguish various US Army branches (troops for land attacks, in the air, or at sea) with specific *equipment* (buildings, facilities, vehicles, gear, weapons) and using specific *tactics* to reach their objectives (offensive or defensive strategies).

As for their effective *communication*, armies are characterized by a closed system based on order and discipline, which is possible by an extensive ranking order (officers and soldiers), and the commands must be accepted without delay.

5 Although the subtitles do not specify his name, an interview reveals that he was chosen for the job by SDI Media Hungary: <http://www.magyarorszinkron.hu/?module=news&action=show&id=167045>. Accessed on: 6 June 2018.

In case of success, these commands are often considered normal, but they are sometimes rewarded (cf. medals); however, it is more important that all members know that punishment is sure to come in cases of disobedience. Their primary aim is to gain dominance and defeat the enemy. Due to the constraints of the present article, we only deal with branches of service, mostly in the US Army, and compare them with their Hungarian and Romanian subtitles.

### 3.1. The army

The United States Army consists of five branches of service:<sup>6</sup> the *Army* (often denotes the forces involved in land operations), the *Air Force*, the *Navy*, the *Marine Corps*, and the *Coast Guard*. However, they are further divided into smaller units, often based on the type of weapon or mode of action. A few translation samples are provided below:

1) *U.S. Army* (4 occurrences)

Hu. *USA hadserege*, **amerikai** csapatok, Egyesült Államok hadserege

Ro. *Armata Statelor Unite*, trupele **americane**

It is visible in both Hungarian and Romanian that – technically speaking – “American” may refer to two continents, the term (in bold) is borrowed and used for the United States of America.

2) *Airborne Infantry* (4 occurrences)

Hu. *légiszállítású hadosztály*

Ro. *infanterie aeropurtată*

3) *the Tank Corps* (1 occurrence)

Hu. *harckocsizók (páncélos hadosztály)*<sup>7</sup>

Ro. *tancuri (trupele blindate de tancuri)*<sup>8</sup>

Example 3 shows that the subdivision is translated in a substandard way, but subtitlers tend to choose shorter terms, whenever possible; the terms in brackets offer the standards renditions.

However, this does not mean that the subtitlers are not aware of the official terms as when the German division is mentioned we have:

4) **Panzer division**, the 10<sup>th</sup> **Panzer Grenadiers** (3 occurrences)

Hu. *SS páncélos hadosztály, tizedik páncergrenádír*<sup>9</sup>

Ro. *Diviziile Panzer SS, divizie de Panzere, Regimentul 10 Panzergrenadieren*

6 Cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uniformed\\_services\\_pay\\_grades\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uniformed_services_pay_grades_of_the_United_States). Accessed on: 6 June 2018.

7 The Hungarian term in brackets is taken from the English–Hungarian Military Dictionary (*Angol-magyar katonai szótár*, 1985).

8 The Romanian term in brackets is taken from the English–Romanian Military Dictionary (Cojocaru 1976).

9 Translation based on spelling, not found anywhere else.

The Army has special assignments (*runner, scout, sentry, shooter, sniper, translator*), all of which are translated correctly.

### 3.2. The air force

The United States Air Force also appears in the subtitles (the protagonists belong to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division):

5) *The Air Force* (1 occurrence)

Hu. *Légierő*

Ro. *aviație*

6) *the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne (Division), Parachute* (21 + 3 occurrences)

Hu. *101-es légiszállítási hadosztály, ejtőernyős (alakulat), alakulat, légiszállítási alakulat, 101-es ejtőernyős ezred*

Ro. *Regimentul 101 Aeropurtate, parașutiști, parașutist, trupele aeropurtate, 101 Aeropurtate, Aeropurtatele, Infanteria Aeropurtată*

The affluence of both Hungarian and Romanian translations clearly shows that the term appears abundantly in the series; we counted 21 occurrences. The Hungarian term *ejtőernyő* stands for *parachute*. What is really troublesome refers to the terminology of army units (group, formation of people): the Hungarian *hadosztály* covers correctly the English *division* (typical number: 10,000–25,000), but *ezred* means *regiment*, a group of people much more reduced in number (1,000–5,500).<sup>10</sup>

The interesting difference between the Hungarian and Romanian subtitles is connected to the German Air Force:

7) *Luftwaffe* (2 occurrences)

Hu. *Luftwaffe*

Ro. *Aviația germană*

The example shows that the Hungarian subtitler preserved the original German term, while the Romanian subtitler offered an established equivalent. The subtitlers acted similarly in both cases when the term was used in the entire series (10 episodes, 9 hours 54 minutes).<sup>11</sup>

Assignments in the Air Force are translated properly (*parachutist, paratrooper, paratroops*) even if the more precise term is reduced:

8) ... *you'll be certified paratroopers* (S1E01, 24: 11)

Hu. *mától hivatalosan is ejtőernyősök*

Ro. *veți deveni militari parașutiști*

10 Check, for instance: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Division\\_\(military\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Division_(military)). Accessed on: 6 June 2018.

11 Cf. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0185906/>. Accessed on: 6 June 2018.

### 3.3. The Marine and the Navy

Although laymen may confuse them, translators or subtitlers should be aware of the differences. Let us take a look at the examples:

9) *the Navy* (2 occurrences)

Hu. *haditengerészet, hajók (haditengerészet)*

Ro. *Marina, la marina (forțele maritime)*

10) *the Marine, marines* (4 occurrences)

Hu. *haditengerészet, haditengerész (tengerészgyalogság)*

Ro. *Marina (Infanteria marină)*

The examples show that neither subtitler makes a clear difference between them, and the Hungarian and Romanian terms refer to the Navy only; the bracketed versions are standard dictionary translations. However, the situation becomes more complicated with the next term:

11) *Seaborne Infantry* (1 occurrence)

Hu. *tengeren szállított gyalogság*

Ro. *Infanteria marină*

This term is rather rare, and the Hungarian subtitle uses explicitation, in fact, describing the way how the US Infantry landed in Europe. The Romanian subtitler does not make a difference between the regular sailors and the infantry embarked for a specific purpose. A justified question is whether this is relevant in the storyline, as all in all only 7 terms were found. Yet, we tend to believe that the differences are important, not to mention that an incorrect translation may become an established equivalent.<sup>12</sup> The only assignment (*sailor*) mentioned regarding the Navy and the Marine Corps was translated properly (Hu. *haditengerész, tengerész*; Ro. *marinar*).

### 3.4. The US Army

The United States Army may also be referred to as *the military* (Hu. *hadsereg*; Ro. *armată*) without causing headache for translators or subtitlers, but the variety of assignments may cause some issues:

12) *Medic* (48 occurrences) – *They took doctors, medics, the whole shebang.*

Hu. *orvos, felcser, szanitéc, az orvosok – elvittek mindenkit. Az orvosokat, felcsereket.*

Ro. *medic, infirmier, sanitar – Au capturat tot personalul medical... Medici, infirmieri, tot personalul.*

<sup>12</sup> While the term *Seaborne Infantry* was nowhere to be found translated into Romanian, the only instance from the subtitle (*Seaborne Infantry will hit these beaches at a specified date and time.*) was already included in an online database: <https://dictionary.reverso.net/english-romanian/Seaborne%20Infantry>. Accessed on: 9 September 2018.



- 13) *surgeon* (3 occurrences); *Kraut surgeon* (1 occurrence)

Hu. *sebész, orvos; fritz sebész*

Ro. *chirurg; chirurg neamt*

- 14) *brain surgeon* (2 occurrences);

Hu. *agysebész*

Ro. *neurochirurg*

The examples show that more terms are used in Hungarian and Romanian referring to the *medic*; *felcser* is the equivalent of *feldsher*, a person providing medical services in emergency situations (such as quick amputations), thus perfect in these circumstances; the Romanian *infirmier* denotes a male nurse. *Szanitéc* and *sanitar* denote a soldier offering first aid, treating the wounded. The movie even offers an extra explanation for *injuries* and *wounds*:

- 15) *Lot of you been injured?* – *It's called wounded. Injured is when you fall out of a tree.*

Hu. – *Nagyon sokan megsérültek? – Sebesülésnek hívják. A sérülés az, ha leesel egy fáról.*

Ro. – *Ați fost accidentați mulți dintre voi? – Se spune răniți. Accident e atunci când cazi din copac sau așa ceva.*

Other assignments caused no difficulty for the subtitlers (*MP*, *observer*, *radioman*, *volunteer*).

### 3.5. Groups within the units

The most troublesome terms belong to groups within units, in which case we need a preliminary table to have an idea how people are grouped for combat purposes,<sup>13</sup> while the terms in bold show which terms are used in *Band of Brothers*:

**Table 1.** *Typical army units and numbers*

[numbers] Typical units	Hungarian unit	Romanian unit
[2–4] <i>fire team</i>	~ <i>csoport</i>	<i>grup de foc</i>
[8–14] <i>squad/section</i>	<i>raj</i>	<i>grupă</i>
[15–45] <i>platoon/troop</i>	<i>szakasz, osztag</i>	<i>pluton</i>
[80–150]	<i>század</i>	<i>companie</i>
<b>company</b>	<i>üteg</i>	<i>baterie, artilerie (navală)</i>
<b>battery</b>	<i>repülőszázad</i>	<i>escadrilă, escadră, escadron,</i>
<i>squadron</i>		<i>companie, divizion, batalion, detașament, subunitate</i>

13 Cf.: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Division\\_\(military\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Division_(military)) (accessed on: 6 June 2018). Where more than one term is used, we relied on the English–Hungarian (*Angol–magyar katonai szótár* 1985) and English–Romanian Military Dictionaries (Cojocaru 1976).

[numbers] Typical units	Hungarian unit	Romanian unit
[300–800] <b>battalion</b>	<i>zászlóalj, osztály</i>	<i>batalion</i>
[1,000–5,500] <b>regiment</b> <i>brigade</i>	<i>ezred</i> <i>dandár, brigád,</i> <i>csoport</i>	<i>regiment</i> <i>brigadă</i>
[10,000–25,000] <b>division</b>	<i>hadosztály</i>	<i>divizie</i>
[30,000–50,000] <i>corps</i>	<i>hadtest</i>	<i>corp de armată</i>
[100,000–300,000] <i>army</i> <i>field army</i> <i>(army of the combined</i> <i>arms and services)</i>	<i>hadsereg</i> <i>tábori/</i> <i>összefegyvernemi</i> <i>hadsereg</i>	<i>armată</i> <i>armată (de arme întrunite)</i>
[2+ field armies] <i>army group/front</i>	<i>hadseregcsoport</i>	<i>grup de armate</i>
[4+ army groups] <i>region/theater</i>	<i>hadszintér</i>	<i>teatrul de operațiuni</i>

Now, let us check whether the subtitlers could render these units properly:

16) *squad* (14 occurrences)

Hu. *raj, csoport* ‘group’, *szakasz* ‘platoon’

Ro. *echipă* ‘team’, *pluton* ‘platoon’, *băieți* ‘boys’, *oameni* ‘people’

Inconsistency is detected as both subtitlers use terms for a more sizeable group (*platoon*), and we consider it a problem that not once the proper term was used by the Romanian subtitler; instead, he favoured the improper *pluton* or words which are used outside the army as well, thus not considered specific terms.

17) *platoon* (77 occurrences)

Hu. *szakasz*

Ro. *pluton, batalion* (S1E06 17: 25)

Although there are 77 occurrences of *platoon*, it is rather shocking to find that it is rendered into Romanian as *battalion*, even if it appeared only once; while the subtitler committed a mistake out of inadvertence, this may result in loss of confidence regarding the quality of the subtitle. We should not forget that TV series are regularly followed by fans, some of which might become experts in the field, in this case, army formations. This might be one of the reasons why there are so many fansubs, as they might often have the feeling that subtitles should be improved. Further instances are presented below:

18) *company* (124 occurrences)

Hu. *század*

Ro. *companie*

19) *battery* (2 occurrences)

Hu. *tüzérüteg*

Ro. *baterie*

20) *battalion* (46 occurrences)Hu. *zászlóalj*, *hadosztály* ‘division’, *ezred* ‘regiment’Ro. *batalion*21) *regiment* (18 occurrences)Hu. *ezred*, *zászlóalj* ‘battalion’, *odafent* ‘up there’Ro. *regiment*22) *division* (20 occurrences)Hu. *hadosztály*, *zászlóalj* ‘battalion’Ro. *divizie*

The examples display a rather colourful palette: the Romanian versions are far better, as both English and Romanian are Indo-European languages, and these terms often have the same root, while the Hungarian subtitle mixes *battalion*, *division*, and *regiment*, which does not favour a proper understanding of the action.

There are two more terms that should be mentioned: the generic *unit* and the very specific *stick* (special formation used for parachute units, usually 12 people in an airplane):

23) *unit* (9 occurrences)Hu. *egység*, *alakulat* ‘formation’Ro. *companie* ‘company’, *pluton* ‘platoon’24) *stick(s)* (2 occurrences)Hu. *szakasz* ‘platoon’, *repülőgépenként* ‘per airplane’Ro. *grup(uri)* (‘groups’), *în avion* ‘in the airplane’

We can see that the generic term is interpreted differently in Hungarian (general terms, without knowing the estimated number of people) and in Romanian (*company* 80 ~ 150 people; *platoon* 15 ~ 45 people, which is a considerable difference).

We can observe that the greatest discrepancies have been found within this section as subtitlers often exchange terms denoting various groups within the units. The reasons may be manifold, among which we can mention the time constraint (subtitles represent the very last stage of movie production, not to mention cases when the movie has already been presented, and subtitles are needed at once) or lack of attention for repetitive terms. Nevertheless, those involved in military translations should pay special attention to various army formations, and summarizing tables about them are within reach.

## 4. Conclusions

The presented examples show that specific military terms regarding the branches of service, especially the groups within units, may be improved. However, this does not mean that the subtitlers did a poor job, having in mind that the entire

length of the series is about ten hours, and the presented mistranslations are rare, to be observed only in very isolated cases. Yet, professional translators should strive for a consistent terminology, at least by creating a separate Excel file with the specific terms, if not a term base compatible with translation software (e.g. *SDL Trados* or *memoQ*).

Proper reference material (bi- or multilingual dictionaries, glossaries, books on the topic) are indispensable as well as occasional expert advice. Moreover, professional translators and subtitlers should be aware of the fact whether prior similar work has been carried out and may be reused as far as terminology (cf. established equivalents) is involved. We are all prone to errors, so a pair of fresh eyes (proofreader) would be advisable, although we know that this is hardly the case of subtitles created in a rush.

Last but not least, the presented material is but the tip of the iceberg; only about 5.2% of the collected material has been examined (47 terms out 957), and thus we are in no position to criticize the quality of the subtitles, except for a few remarks regarding possible improvement. A forthcoming article or articles must deal with further military terms (belonging to *army equipment, ranks, tactics, commands, rewards, and punishments*), dedicating a special investigation to the *abbreviations* and *acronyms* used in the army, which may be completed with a linguistic examination regarding language use (style, register, etc.).

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